

Nehemiah 5:1-13 – Troubles in the Church

TSK, HebrewLexicon, Henry, Poole, Geneva, Armstrong, JFB, Clarke, Gaebelin, Barnes, Gill, Delitzsch, Expositor, Trapp, Handfuls, Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ: Troubles are a normal part of life and it was no different in Judah when the Jews were repairing the walls of Jerusalem that were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

You will remember their troubles: Sanballat and his growing confederacy mocked God's people and planned to murder them to stop their kingdom work. So they had to deal with that, and they did.

But that was not the end of their troubles. **There were troubles from among God's people as well.**

Brothers were taking advantage of their brothers so the work of rebuilding the walls was beginning to stall.

With the walls not being repaired, worship would be delayed, and that was the worst consequence of all! Hear about this today.

Our headings are:

Weakness – trouble in the camp

Warnings – stop doing this

Work – the people respond

Our goals are: **That recognizing all the Lord did for you and how much you should love your brothers in return, you will not abuse them but work with them for Christ's kingdom.**

Weakness – Trouble in the Camp

1 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. 2 For there were those who said, "We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live." 3 There were also some who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine."

1. In the midst of repairing Jerusalem's walls so the people could worship again in safety and gain financial security, an ugly problem raised its ugly head: *Some Jews used the opportunity to become loan sharks and charged excessive interest from Jews who mortgaged their possessions to get money for their families to eat while working for free on the walls!*

Deuteronomy 23:19 "You shall not charge interest to your brother — interest on money or food or anything that is lent out at interest.

These **Jews who cried out against the abusers weren't lazy people or wasteful;** they simply wanted to see Jerusalem rebuilt. But now they **did not have food to feed their babies.** They had mortgaged their houses and land and were out of money.

These unscrupulous people **did not think about, or care about, the coming of the Messiah** – the most important event in the history of the world.

4 There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards.

2. These poor Jews not only had no money to feed their families but they even had to borrow money to pay the onerous tax of the foreign Medo-Persian king, but the Jewish businessmen didn't care.

Ecclesiastes 4:1 Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! **The tears of the oppressed, But they have no comforter** — On the side of their oppressors there is power, But they have no comforter.

5 "Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards."

3. Things got so bad the Jews sold their children into slavery to pay their family debts.

Additionally, there were famine-like conditions for many years. **God had cursed them during the days of Haggai for ignoring his worship and focusing on their own money.**

So there were great troubles in the camp.

4. Lessons:

a. The love of money could cause even the closest person to you to become a monster.

So many relationships have been damaged over a little bit of money.

So many siblings don't speak to each other.

So many people have been fired from their jobs for stealing.

Greed is everywhere, even in much of modern capitalism.

So guard your hearts.

But more, you may even think because you are rich you are better than others, but the poor may be better than you.

b. There is nothing wrong with being rich or poor, just don't get rich by crushing the poor.

Your religion and your economics can never be separated. Remember, hating the poor insults their maker.

c. Remember, there are many more important things in this life than making a profit. You are to care for all of God's children. You have the same Father in heaven and the same mother on earth – the church.

Malachi 2:10 Have we not all one Father? **Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another** by profaning the covenant of the fathers?

Warnings – Stop doing this

6 And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.
7 After **serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers**, and said to them, "**Each of you is exacting usury** from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them.

1. Nehemiah, seeing how selfish, how greedy some Jews were against their own brothers and sisters, even allowing little ones to starve and go into slavery, thought about it a great deal, and decided to shame the abusers for their greedy actions.

Was this a distraction for Nehemiah from his work? Yes. But he had to respond. Abuses of any sort had to be addressed.

Who were these abusive Jews? These were people who lined their own pockets on the backs of volunteers.

Why was this wrong? Jews weren't allowed to exact interest from their brothers who had become poor because of providence.

Was this an egregious sin? The Jewish people who themselves were farmers and needed their children to help them farm, could not earn the money (with no children to help) to redeem their children from servitude.

More, these children had the same mark of the covenant as the unscrupulous people's children, yet they were treated as slaves!

So Nehemiah had to act.

2. Nehemiah did something very unique: Because this was a public sin, he called a public assembly to rebuke the abusers.

This is what God called Judah to do!

Ezekiel 16:49 "Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.

And notice he did not delay this, but courageously (like Joshua) confronted the transgressors.

8 And I said to them, "**According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren** who were sold to the nations. **Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren?** Or should they be sold to us?" Then they were silenced and found nothing to say.

3. Nehemiah showed the ridiculousness of the exploitation of their own people because when God's people were enslaved in Persia, many Jews paid for other Jews to be freed, but now they were causing Jews to go into slavery.

When Nehemiah said that, the people realized their foolishness and abusive policy and could not say anything against him

9 Then I said, "What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in **the fear of our God** because of the **reproach of the nations, our enemies?**"

4. Nehemiah then directly warned them they should walk in the fear of God otherwise their enemies would mock Yahweh.

What is the "fear of God?" This refers, not only to a holy reverence of God, but also reverence of God's law.

When the Jews exploited the poor and did not walk in the fear of God, **it caused God to be shamed among the Gentiles.**

5. Lessons:

a. It is okay to lend money at a profit if the person borrowing money is using it

for business to make a profit.

But if someone is desperate and needs to feed his family, you are not to charge him interest beyond the rate of inflation.

It is abusive to lend money to the desperate poor for profit.

b. The “fear of the Lord” endures forever! That is God’s law! It can never change. You are to fear God. The one who fears God trusts in Jesus’ work.

If you trust in Jesus, you won’t abuse his people.

c. Pray for your elders to be wise in dealing with internal conflicts. We need God’s wisdom to keep Christ’s church pure.

If the elders don’t act, shame comes on the name of Jesus.

d. The church can never be strong when God’s people are abusing each other. Be ready to denounce those who abuse the weak.

The same Lord died for you both. **You have the same kingdom to build.**

Work – The people respond

10 "I also, with **my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain.** Please, let us **stop this usury!** 11 "**Restore now to them,** even this day, **their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses,** also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them."

1. Nehemiah first action was to set a good example: He, his own close brothers, and his assistants lent money and food to the people at no interest.

2. The abusive Jews decided to stop taking interest on the poor and to restore what they held as collateral.

No one was allowed in Israel to hold as collateral what was essential for the borrower’s survival. So no one, for instance, could hold someone’s cloak he needed to sleep in at night, as collateral.

Consider with 0% inflation **they were charging the poor 1% per month interest (12% per annum).**

12 So they said, "**We will restore it,** and will require nothing from

them; we will do as you say." Then I called the priests, and **required an oath** from them that they would do according to this promise.

3. The abusive Jews restored the land, vineyards, olive groves, and the interest they charged the poor.

4. The abusive Jews took an oath before God saying they would do as they promised.

Nehemiah wasn't taking any chances of them changing their minds. He called God to witness.

13 Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, "**So may God shake out each man from his house**, and from his property, **who does not perform this promise**. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And **all the assembly said, "Amen!"** and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

5. Nehemiah pronounced a curse from God on anyone who abused his own brother in the future.

He did this by shaking out his clothes...and saying, "May God shake out anyone who abused his own brothers again." An oath!

6. The abusive Jews agreed verbally...that God should curse them if they broke the promise.

7. Lessons:

a. Don't take advantage of fellow Christians. You have the same goal– the glory of Christ.

You have covenanted in your heart and with your lips to do this. Do what is right.

Good promises are good things, but good performances are everything.

b. Deliver the poor from his troubles when it is in your ability to do so. That is **YOUR** business.

Psalms 82:4 Deliver the poor and needy; Free them from the hand of the wicked.

c. You don't likely lend money to a Christian in Canada to survive, but there are other hindrances you can place in front of him so he can't do the work he should: Ignoring him for the **color of his skin**, **not inviting him** to your house, **not encouraging him**, or **unfairly criticizing his work**.

Conclusion:

In the midst of the great work of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, a nasty thing occurred: Jewish loan sharks abused the volunteers, causing them to lose their land, homes, and children.

Nehemiah rebuked them for the wrong they did and instructed them to change.

They repented and showed it.

It was a good time in Judah! Troubles left!

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ:

1. The enemy outside is powerful and increasing so the church does not need internal battles! Christians need to be on the same side.

Be on the same side in congregations, in federations, and in Christendom.

Care for each other.

Fight for each other.

Support each other.

Pray for each other.

2. This does not mean you will agree on all issues in this congregation, in the URC, or in worldwide church. As long as there is sin and the fallen human mind, there will be differences.

But when it is possible, work together with other believers for the common good to advance the Savior's name and glory.

Finally: **We may have troubles in the church, but they are only minor.** One day in heaven we will know perfectly and love perfectly because we are God's children through Christ.

But if you don't know Christ, **you will spend eternity in hell with the realization you have to bear your own sins for eternity.** But you have a way out now. Ask God to make you his child because Jesus died for sinners.